

Bahá'í Scholarship

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I would like to congratulate you on this wonderful opening of the First Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies in Japan. I am quite impressed with the professional quality of work done by the ABS Executive Committee to prepare and carry out this conference.

Representing the Continental Board of Counsellors, I would like to share with you today some guidance on Bahá'í scholarship given by both the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Center, as well as some thoughts and material from The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. As a first step, let us place before our gaze the magnitude of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and try to understand that the spiritual energies latent within His mighty Revelation were poured forth in almost a constant forty-year stream of revelation. The vehicle of these spiritual energies was, and is, the Word of God which was revealed by Him for this age. These Words were not the fruit of learning and knowledge, in as much as Bahá'u'lláh's education was only an elementary education, but this Word of God was the emanation of the Holy Spirit. The revelation of the Word of God has never been dependent upon acquired knowledge. The Bearers of the Message of God, in most cases, were devoid of learning.

The revealed Word is dual in nature. It has an inner spirit and an outer form. The innermost spirit is limitless in its potentialities; it belongs to the world of the uncreated and is generated by the Holy Spirit of God. The outer form of the Word of God acts as a channel through which the stream of God's Holy Spirit flows. And yet, the Word of God reveals only a limited measure of its spiritual truth and meaning to the mind of man, who, by reason of his finite form, is incapable of comprehending these spiritual truths in their fullness. The innermost reality, the power, the efficacy, and the creativeness of the Word acquire greater significance as the soul, after its separation from the body, progresses in the spiritual worlds of God. Although the meanings and latent spiritual truths of the Word of God remain somewhat obscure to the mind of man, the Manifestations Who reveal this Word are aware of its full potency and significance.

Every word sent down from the heaven of Divine Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh stated, is filled with soft-flowing rivers of divine mysteries and wisdom. How great is this multitude of truths, which the garment of words can never contain! Yet, regarding such greatness of Truth, Bahá'u'lláh confides:

Not everything that [even] a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it. (Gleanings, LXXXIX, p. 176.)

Furthermore, about the greatness of His Truth, He instructs us in this way:

... that thou mayest detach thyself from all human learning, for, "What would it profit any man to strive after learning when he hath already found and recognized Him Who is the Object of all knowledge?" Cleave to the Root of Knowledge, and to Him Who is the Fountain thereof. (Gleanings, LXXXIX, p. 177.)

So great are the words uttered by the Manifestations that not only do they have inner meanings but even a single letter of Their revelation contains divine mysteries and

significances. The Báb, for example, has revealed three thousand verses in explanation of the significances of the first letter "V" of the Súrih-i-V'al-'Astr.

It is, however, Bahá'u'lláh Who is called "The Most Exalted Pen". He is the Revealer of the Most Great Spirit. So voluminous, for the first time in human history, is the revelation of this Manifestation, with so many tablets, given in the form of exhortations, prayers, meditations, and so forth, many of them penned by His own hand.

What, then, is true knowledge? Bahá'u'lláh says it is to be aware of the ignorance of self and to know God. How do we know God? It is through knowing the Manifestation and reading from this voluminous source of revealed verses. To help us understand these verses, it is useful to know that in this dispensation the verses of God have been revealed in nine different styles or categories:

1. Tablets with the tone of command and authority.
2. Those with the tone of servitude, meekness, and supplication.
3. Writings dealing with interpretation of the old Scriptures, religious beliefs, and doctrines of the past.
4. Writings in which laws and ordinances have been enjoined for this age and laws of the past abrogated.
5. Mystical Writings.
6. Tablets concerning matters of government and world order, and those addressed to the kings.
7. Tablets dealing with subjects of learning and knowledge, divine philosophy, mysteries of creation, medicine, alchemy, etc.
8. Tablets exhorting men to education, goodly character, and divine virtues.
9. Tablets dealing with social teachings.

Bahá'u'lláh says His Writings are simple to understand, provided the heart is pure and sanctified. The understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh need not depend upon academic knowledge; the unsophisticated and the illiterate are quite able to recognize its divine origin and to understand its teachings.

The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh confers a new capacity on those whose hearts are touched by its light and enables them to acquire a knowledge which is not dependent upon learning: "*Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth.*" (Hádith, quoted by Bahá'u'lláh in The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys, p. 54.)

There is quite an abundance of information and guidance on scholarship which is promulgated by the International Teaching Center. The International Teaching Center as you know, will soon have its own offices at the right hand of the House of Justice on Mount Carmel. In one of its letters dated 9 August 1984 to all Counsellors on this topic of scholarship, they turn our attention to the Naw-Rúz message of 1979 addressed to the Bahá'í world, in which the Universal House of Justice states that "at the heart of all activities, the spiritual, intellectual, and community life of the believers must be developed and fostered."

An important component of the intellectual life of the community is Bahá'í scholarship, and the International Teaching Center in their letter of 22 March 1981 to all Counsellors called attention to the valuable services which could be rendered by the Counsellors in this field. I suppose my talk to you today is a part of such service. The International Teaching Center elaborates their purpose in writing to us:

... is to provide further information on this important subject [Bahá'í scholarship], in the hope that it will help you to devise ways to foster the development of Bahá'í scholarship along lines that are in accordance with Bahá'í standards and values.

Therefore, today I share with you what are considered Bahá'í standards and values for Bahá'í scholarship. First, as to the importance of Bahá'í scholarship, it was over 50 years ago, that the beloved Guardian, in this statement, emphasized the need to develop the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community:

In these days when people are so skeptical about religion and look with so much contempt towards religious organizations and movements, there seems to be more need than ever for our young Bahá'ís to be well-equipped intellectually, so that they may be in a position to present the Message in a befitting way, and in a manner that would convince every unbiased observer of the effectiveness and power of the Teachings.

This is from a letter dated 5 May 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer.

Some years later, he described Bahá'í scholarship as being an important aid in teaching the Faith to those who do not find the Bahá'í principles novel in the light of modern thought. To this same end, the Universal House of Justice stated in a letter dated 3 January 1979 written on their behalf to an individual believer, that:

The Universal House of Justice regards Bahá'í scholarship as of great potential importance for the development and consolidation of the Bahá'í community as it emerges from obscurity.

And the Supreme Body pointed out in the opening sentence of its Ridván 1984 message to the Bahá'ís of the world nearly eight years ago that the emergence from obscurity of the Faith had been a marked feature of the previous five years. This emergence naturally directs unprecedented public attention to the Cause of God, and also necessitates increased emphasis on the development of Bahá'í scholarship since, in that same message, the House of Justice says:

Persistently greater and greater efforts must be made to acquaint the leaders of the world, in all departments of life, with the true nature of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation as the sole hope for the pacification and unification of the world.

What, then, is the nature of Bahá'í scholarship? A vital prerequisite to the fostering of Bahá'í scholarship is the acquisition of a clearer understanding of the meaning of this term "Bahá'í scholarship". I can do no better than to offer you an illuminating passage from the writings of the Guardian, which might well be taken as a definition of the attributes toward which a Bahá'í scholar should aspire:

The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.

This is from a letter dated 21 October 1943 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer. Please note this distinctive feature of Bahá'í scholarship: the relating of the Bahá'í teachings, in any generation, to the present-day concerns and thoughts of the

people of that time. The Universal House of Justice in a communication to the International Teaching Center dated 10 February 1981 states that:

Bahá'í scholarship can be fostered, by encouraging budding scholars and by promoting within the Bahá'í community an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others. At the same time the fundamental core of the believers' faith should be strengthened by an increasing awareness of the cardinal truth and vital importance of the Covenant, and an ever-growing love for Bahá'u'lláh.

Furthermore, from a passage of the Guardian's writings dealing with the attributes to which a Bahá'í scholar should aspire, the International Teaching Center states that it is evident that Bahá'í scholarship:

- should be an endeavor accessible to all members of the Bahá'í community;
 - should strive to relate the Bahá'í teachings to the thinking and concerns of the non-Bahá'í population around the believers, including those who may lack formal education;
 - should arm our minds with appropriate knowledge so that we can better demonstrate the truths enshrined in our Faith;
- and
- should be aware of the perilous danger that Bahá'í scholars must avoid: the distortion of religious truth in order to make it conform to understandings and perceptions current in the scientific world.

There exist two very real possibilities for the development of this kind of Bahá'í scholarship, according to a letter dated 21 August 1977 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer: one is by Bahá'ís becoming experts, and the other is by experts becoming Bahá'ís.

Now, I would like you to realize, that this coming April (1992) when the statement Bahá'u'lláh becomes available to the masses around the world, at that point, the generality of mankind, every individual soul, will have direct access to Bahá'u'lláh. And at that time we may see very great souls come forward as Bahá'ís, or great scholars accepting this wonderful Cause. When this happens, the potential for Bahá'í scholarship will vastly increase in as much as the call of the House of Justice states ". . . the promotion of Bahá'í scholarship is to analyze the problems of mankind in every field and to show how the Teachings solve them." This is from a letter dated 19 January 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer. And how eager, we can easily assure ourselves, humanity will be for the healing answers which Bahá'u'lláh offers.

Toward this end of fostering Bahá'í scholarship, the Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members are to stimulate and encourage Bahá'ís of distinctive capacity and promise, especially young Bahá'ís, to become eminent in any legitimate field of knowledge.

Already we have many examples of believers, many role models, who have become recognized widely for their scholarship, while at the same time being distinguished by their abiding devotion to the Faith and a compelling desire to teach the Cause. Let us cast our gaze toward such exemplary figures as Mirza Abu'l Fadl, George Townshend, and Hasan Balyuzi and in this present day, Mr. Adib Taherzadeh, Mr. Peter Khan, Mr. Hooper Dunbar, Mr. Ali Nakhjavani, and Mr. Hushmand Fatheazam, all of whom are existing members of the Universal House of Justice. And with these latter five names and their distinguished loving faces fresh in our minds, let us return to that admonition of the Universal House of Justice to promote "within the Bahá'í community an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others."

In order to promote such an atmosphere of tolerance, while at the same time

strengthening the fundamental core of the believers' faith, the Universal House of Justice has stated in two of its letters written in 1979 and 1980 to individual believers, from which I slightly paraphrase, that:

firstly, the combination of absolute loyalty to the Manifestation of God, and the intelligent study of His Teachings, is a particular strength of this Dispensation. The Guardian has written that this Faith enjoins upon us the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth;

and

secondly, there is an obligation among those who hold positions of responsibility in the Administrative Order, to react calmly and with tolerant and enquiring minds to views which differ from their own. None can claim to have a perfect understanding of this Revelation. Scholars in particular, should remember the many warnings against the fomenting of discord among the friends. "It is the duty of the institutions of the Faith to guard the community against such dangers."

This warning against the fomenting of discord highlights one of the hazards facing believers who embark upon the practice of Bahá'í scholarship. By striving to express themselves with courtesy, moderation, tact, and wisdom, Bahá'í scholars will contribute to the maintenance of an atmosphere of tolerance.

In strengthening the core of the believers' faith, there is strongly emphasized the need for Bahá'í scholars who are thoroughly deepened in the spirit of the Cause, as well as being well-versed in its teachings. The Universal House of Justice in a letter written on their behalf to an individual believer on 27 March 1983 states:

. . . great advances in knowledge and understanding will be made by those who, while well versed in their subjects and adhering to the principles of research, are also thoroughly imbued with love for the Faith and the determination to grow.

In the same letter, on the danger of intellectual pride which a Bahá'í scholar must combat within himself, the House of Justice felt it prudent to warn that "Bahá'í scholars must beware of the temptations of intellectual pride". And that they would be subjected to intellectual tests: "Any Bahá'í who rises to eminence in academic circles will be exposed to the powerful influence of [such intellectual pride]".

The provisions of the Covenant are our protection against distortion of the Teachings and against the subtle temptations of intellectual pride. Central to the Covenant is the authority of the Manifestation of God and the infallible institutions that the Holy Writings ordained. In His Will and Testament [Part Two], `Abdu'l-Bahá admonishes: "*Everyone must turn to the Most Holy Book, and for all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice.*" (Will and Testament of Abd'ul Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 447.) This has been clarified by the Universal House of Justice in their letter of 7 December 1967 to an individual believer: "In the Bahá'í Faith there are two authoritative centers. one center is the Book with its Interpreter, and the other is the Universal House of Justice guided by God." And it has pointed out that ". . . the Revelation of the Manifestation of God is the standard [the very standard] for all knowledge". A pivotal companion point which the House of Justice cautions us on in the same paragraph, is that our:

attempting to make the Bahá'í Faith relevant to modern society is to incur the grave risk of compromising the fundamental verities of our Faith in an effort to make it conform to current theories and practices.

This is from a letter dated 21 July 1968 written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly.

Thus a vital element, a crucial element, of Bahá'í scholarship and I cannot stress this enough is humility in recognizing the limitations of the human mind in its attempts to encompass the Divine Message. There is a wonderful Japanese proverb, and I share that with you here: "Minoru inaho wa koube tareru." This translates as: "The head of an abundant rice plant hangs down." Probably better known in English is a similar proverb: "The bough that bears most hangs lowest." This is the example of humility which Bahá'í scholars should strive for.

The matter of interpretation is also something very central to the Covenant, and the Universal House of Justice has succinctly clarified this by stating ". . . the individual's views are merely his own." This includes, of course, the views of any individual. The House of Justice continues in its guidance to us by saying:

the friends must therefore learn to listen to the views of others without being [either] overawed or allowing their faith to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Bahá'ís.

This came from a letter written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer in 27 May 1966.

The majestic Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, we are told, gives rise to a Bahá'í community, including our Bahá'í Community, which will increasingly:

- . foster creative development
- . encourage individual expression,

and

- . allow Bahá'í scholars to exemplify the harmony of faith and reason as a hallmark of the Bahá'í Dispensation.

Thus, as we are gathered here today to observe the opening of this first Annual Conference of the Association of Bahá'í Studies in Japan, we can have confidence, just as our beloved World Center has confidence, that indeed the careful development of Bahá'í scholarship:

- . will widen the range of people attracted to the truths of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation;
- . will enhance the prestige and influence of the Faith;

and

- . will broaden the foundation of our emerging world civilization.

To this end, and in conclusion, I would like to suggest to those Bahá'í scholars gathered here, and those in future who will gather amongst them, and those who will follow in their footsteps:

- . To assist in actualizing the will of the Universal House of Justice under the protection of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh.
- . To create useful methods of teaching and promoting the Faith, especially to prominent leaders of thought in Japan.
- . To relate to current situations, presenting solutions to problems, not merely on the desk, but with a suggested plan of action.
- . To follow the Bahá'í administration; to lead toward universal participation; and to practice the law of consultation in your pursuits of study.
- . To aim for the excellence of both spirit and intellect.
- . To promote the new standards of scholarship and life which were presented by

Bahá'u'lláh, rather than to compromise with the present-day standard of scholars or of society at large.

- To each have a goal, for Bahá'í scholars who are pioneers, to raise up one Japanese Bahá'í scholar who is as devoted as yourself.
- To put your emphasis on scholarship of the soul rather than mere intellectual pursuits.
- To approach with humility, as is the example of the earth which carries all, nourishes all, gives energy to all, and serves the needs of every existing creature and yet, is at the foot of all existence, keeping the lowest position to all. This should be the aim of Bahá'í scholar's in their spiritual approach.

Great potential exists for the Association for Bahá'í Studies in Japan to fill a major role in the development of the Faith in Japan. This is because the Association now has the opportunity of presenting those sacred, inviolable principals which can rapidly transform Japan spiritually, and turn Japan ablaze with the fire of the love of God, at this very moment when she is at the apex of enjoying her material prosperity.

I pray that, with the blessings of Bahá'u'lláh, this association will, from this point of its inception, grow and develop under the guidance of the noble institutions of the Universal House of Justice and the National Spiritual Assembly of Japan.

References

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